

Representative Jim Turner
Statement on Mark-up on First Responder Legislation
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness and Response
Select Committee on Homeland Security
November 20, 2003

This bill is a product of bi-partisan compromise and bi-partisan effort. The compromise legislation merges together the best ideas and concepts of two bills: the PREPARE Act (H.R. 3158), endorsed by 148 Democrats, and the initial version of H.R. 3266, introduced by Chairman Cox.

I am pleased that the Chairman accepted the core concept of the PREPARE Act, which is a bold new model for distributing federal grant funds to first responders based on building essential capabilities to address the real threats and vulnerabilities our nation faces from terrorism. Chairman Cox and I expect that the bill will receive strong support of the Full Committee and the House of Representatives.

The bill departs from the ways of the past by abandoning arbitrary formulas and targeting funding where it is needed the most, while preparing communities across America to respond to terrorism.

It also provides funding to assist first responders to gain an immediate capability to communicate with each other, and requires the Federal government to set standards for interoperable communications equipment in six months.

Our Committee is demonstrating today that the events of September 11, 2001, require a new approach to governing.

We are in a race against terrorists attempting to do harm to our nation. We need to fight the war on terror effectively abroad – both militarily and diplomatically; we need to protect our homeland, and we need to prepare our communities in the event we are attacked again. We do not have the luxury of time. We cannot be satisfied with business as usual. And right now – we are not ready.

Our current system for funding first responders does not work. We are spending an arbitrary amount of money each year, the funds are not distributed where they are needed the most, and we have no idea whether we are building an effective nationwide capability to respond to acts of terror.

The legislation before us today meets the challenge of our times. It is a bold new model for distributing federal grant funds. Instead of relying on an arbitrary formula, the bill is based on the principle of building essential capabilities across the country to respond to the threats and the vulnerabilities communities face.

The bill brings first responders to the table to help determine what those “essential capabilities” are, and then requires states, regions, and localities to base their grant applications on this concept. Applications are prioritized based on the risk that communities face, but funds will be distributed across the nation until every community can tell their citizens that they are prepared.

Enactment of this bill will have numerous benefits:

For the first time, we will have an assessment of the funding necessary to prepare our communities for the threat of terrorism and will be able to measure our progress in reaching that goal;

We encourage planning and cooperation across state, city, and county lines by allowing regions to apply directly to the federal government for grants;

We direct funding where the terrorists are most likely to strike, while ensuring that our rural communities identify and defend against the vulnerabilities they face as well.

We address the communications interoperability problem by funding innovative emergency systems that can provide interoperability right now, while encouraging long term solutions by requiring the federal government to set communications equipment standards.

We reform the Department of Homeland Security's color-coded system by requiring it to address threats on a regional or industry basis.

And we establish a new office to encourage the coordination of businesses and individual volunteers to help prepare our nation to respond to acts of terror.

Just like our country, and the Department of Homeland Security, we have many other issues to address on this Committee. Our action today lays a strong foundation for the challenges that lie ahead.